

## Petition to Review the Permit of the Wasatch Powderbird Guides

**Background.** We are writing to ask you to review and reconsider the portions of the Wasatch Powderbird Guides (WPG) Special Use Permit that allows WPG to use explosive devices in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest (WCNF) backcountry to test the snowpack stability.

Our motivation for this request is to establish a safer environment for all winter backcountry users in the WCNF, regardless of their mode of travel. We believe the explosive testing is hazardous, and we are glad professionals perform this task in certain controlled areas, such as highways and ski areas. However, we believe WPG's testing is not safe for other users, and that one user group should not be allowed to endanger others with the use of explosives.

**History.** On January 5, 2006, WPG explosives released a Class 3 avalanche (on a scale from 1 to 5) on Cardiac Ridge into Cardiff Fork of Big Cottonwood Canyon. The avalanche is shown in the photograph below and on page 3 of this petition. Notice that the photograph was taken when the avalanche occurred from a nearby vantage point.



Photo: Derek Riesenberg

Facts about this avalanche include the following points:

- According to the Utah Avalanche Center (UAC), the avalanche was 7 to 10 feet deep, 450 feet wide and ran 2000 vertical feet.
- The length of the avalanche path is at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile.
- The avalanche was released after sunrise (7:51 a.m.). Independent observers have estimated the time of release between 8:15 and 8:30.
- The location of the avalanche is within 2 miles of the trailhead in the town of Alta.

Had a backcountry user become engulfed in this avalanche, they certainly would have died. This was confirmed by the UAC in their forecast on January 6<sup>th</sup> where they said a deep avalanche like this avalanche is “basically unsurvivable.” To illustrate the likelihood that this avalanche could have involved other users, we call your attention to the following points:

- Cardiac Ridge is a popular area for backcountry users. Many backcountry users can and do walk to this area in one hour or less from Alta.
- Many backcountry users are active in the early morning hours, and on January 5<sup>th</sup>, at least two ski touring parties were close enough to the slide to be able to photograph it while it was moving.
- The UAC forecast a “moderate” avalanche hazard for the Central Wasatch on January 5<sup>th</sup>, therefore, Cardiac Ridge would have been a reasonable destination on that day for those

familiar with safe backcountry travel practices. We are unaware of backcountry users unintentionally releasing deep slab avalanches on or around the 5<sup>th</sup> of January.

- The avalanche overran terrain that is commonly used by backcountry users, both for their uphill and downhill travel. At least one route to the avalanche path passes through thick trees that could have easily obscured a party of backcountry users from WPG personnel in their helicopter.
- WPG does not follow established protocols to ensure the safety of other users when they use explosives. During avalanche control activities at ski areas and along the road, exposed areas are closed to ensure safety. On January 5<sup>th</sup>, users were in or near Cardiff Fork and WPG did not have anyone on the ground to ensure the safety of those users. Without carefully checking the area from the ground, the length of this avalanche makes it inconceivable that WPG could be certain no other users were in the path of the avalanche.

Combining these observations with the fact that WPG intentionally released a massive and unsurvivable avalanche leads us to conclude that only good fortune prevented fatalities on the morning of the January 5<sup>th</sup>.

Unfortunately, this avalanche is not an isolated incident. Similar, well documented, backcountry avalanches were created by WPG in two of the previous four ski seasons. In March of 2002, WPG explosives released a Class 4 avalanche in Big Cottonwood Canyon's Mineral Fork. In January of 2005, WPG released several Class 3 or larger avalanches in Little Cottonwood's White Pine Fork. Backcountry users frequently visit both of these areas. These avalanches and the January 5<sup>th</sup> avalanche demonstrate that WPG testing routinely produces very large avalanches.

**Conclusion.** In this letter, we have provided the evidence needed to demonstrate that backcountry users are likely to be involved in an avalanche created by WPG. This depends on three critical points. First, WPG is routinely releasing large avalanches during its explosive testing. Second, WPG cannot be certain that other users are not in the path of these avalanches. Third, these avalanches are occurring in areas that are regularly visited by backcountry users during times when WPG is testing. The combination of these three independent points establishes a statistical likelihood that someone will be involved in an avalanche created by WPG's testing as it is currently performed. We believe the avalanche on January 5<sup>th</sup> proves this likelihood is unacceptably large.

**Request.** For the safety of the winter backcountry users of the WCNF, we ask you to review and reconsider the permit of WPG. Specifically, when explosives are used, it should be clear that WPG possesses and uses an established protocol that assures no other users will be endangered by their activity. It is our opinion that clear restrictions should be placed on WPG testing. We favor a revision of the permit that reads:

- The use of explosives for the purpose of backcountry stability testing shall only be allowed in two circumstances.

First, testing shall be allowed if WPG places safety personnel above and below the avalanche to warn other backcountry users that testing is underway. Furthermore, for this testing, the use of explosives shall only be allowed after on-snow testing reveals the presence of an instability that cannot be adequately tested using non-explosive snow science methods. WPG shall be required to maintain publicly available documents describing each explosive test and their on-snow results.

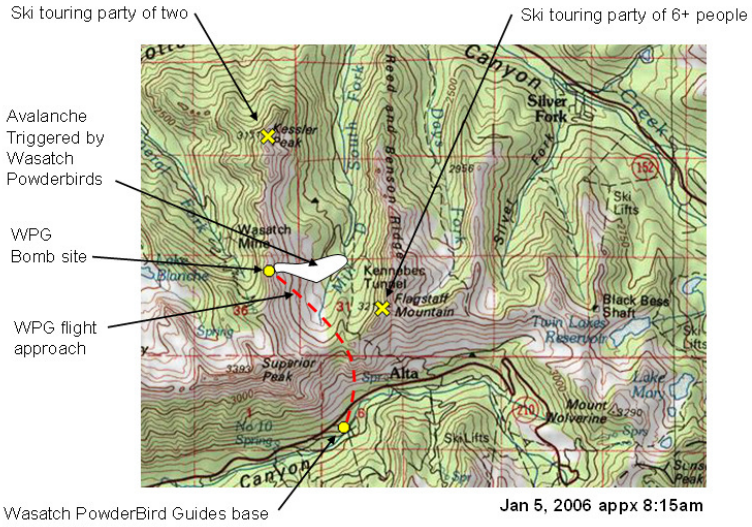
Second, testing shall be allowed at times when the roads in the two adjacent canyons to the testing are closed. For example, testing in Cardiff Fork would require closure of the roads in Little Cottonwood and Big Cottonwood Canyons.

# Cardiff Fork Avalanche, January 5, 2006



The extent of the avalanche path.  
Credit: Andrew McLean

Proximity to people and places.



Avalanche debris.  
Credit: UAC website

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I believe the use of explosives for backcountry avalanche stability testing should not endanger other backcountry users, and I support a revision of the Wasatch Powderbird Guides permit that allows this testing to enhance the safety of others.

Date	Printed Name	Address	Signature

Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Page # \_\_\_\_\_

About this petition:

Please do not distribute this page with the petition.

The purpose of this petition is to increase the margin of safety for backcountry users in the Central Wasatch Mountains. The Cardiff Fork avalanche referred to above could have hurt someone, and it wasn't a one-time event. This petition was written to ask the Forest Service to increase the safety of all backcountry users by decreasing the likelihood that someone is caught in avalanche created during testing.

Your help distributing the petition and obtaining signatures would be greatly appreciated and will hopefully result in safer backcountry recreation.

If you have the energy and desire to help, please print a copy of this letter and organize as many signatures as possible. When you have the signatures, please add a set of initials and page numbers to the signature pages to help organize them. Finally, mail your pages to the address below. The impact of the petition will be stronger if this is done quickly, so please send the petition back by mid-February.

If you would like a printed copy of the petition, send email to the address below and a copy will be mailed to you.

If you include your email address in the package, you will get a confirmation that they have been received and a periodic message describing what has been done with the petition.

Thank you for your help.

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